

JOHN HUMPHRYS
INTERVIEWS
GEORGE ENTWISTLE

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HUMPHRYS: George Entwistle, let's come to that question of your position a bit later in this interview. Let me ask you first what went wrong?

ENTWISTLE: Well we, we made a film that relied upon a witness who yesterday came out and said he'd made a mistaken identification. That mistaken identification meant that the film we had broadcast was wrong and we apologised for it because we should not have put out a film that was so fundamentally wrong. What happened here is completely unacceptable. In my view the film should not have gone out. I've taken clear and decisive action to start to find out what happened and put things right. I've commissioned a report from one of my senior editorial leaders, Director of BBC Scotland which I've asked to have on my desk by Sunday and further action will follow from that, disciplinary if necessary. But as John Whittingdale says the key here is to understand exactly what happened before we leap to judgment.

HUMPHRYS: And once again we are shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. Why didn't you ask those questions before the film went out?

ENTWISTLE: Well the, not every film and not every piece of journalism made inside the BBC is referred to the Editor in Chief.

HUMPHRYS: Is this just another film, another piece of journalism?

ENTWISTLE: No, it's an important piece of journalism and obviously I've asked Ken MacQuarrie to get to the bottom of exactly what happened and I want to be kept ..

HUMPHRYS: Ken MacQuarrie is ..

ENTWISTLE: The Director, sorry the Director of BBC Scotland yes. And I, but I want to be careful about prejudging what he says. But, but from the enquiries I've been able to make so far this was a piece of journalism referred to senior figures within news, referred up to the level of the management board and had appropriate attention from the, from the lawyers. Now the question is in spite of all that why did it go wrong. I'm not – no stepping away from that. Something definitely and clearly, unambiguously went wrong here.

HUMPHRYS: When did you know ..

ENTWISTLE: But we now, we now have to be clear and we have to find out what exactly happened.

HUMPHRYS: When did you know that this film was being broadcast and when did it, when was it drawn to your attention that it was going to make extraordinarily serious allegations about a man whose identity would inevitably be uncovered now wrongly as we now know?

ENTWISTLE: The film was not drawn to my attention before transmission.

HUMPHRYS: At all? Nobody said to you at all ..

ENTWISTLE: No John but I ..

HUMPHRYS: .. at the BBC?

ENTWISTLE: .. I need to explain that there, there are an awful lot of pieces of journalism going a.., going on around the BBC which do not get referred to the Editor in Chief.

HUMPHRYS: Of course there are.

ENTWISTLE: Not everything gets referred to the Editor in Chief. Now the key is, is it referred sufficiently, sufficiently far up the chain of command and in this case I think the right referrals were made.

HUMPHRYS: But a tweet was ..

ENTWISTLE: But I, but I need, but I need, I need, of course it's important to give Ken MacQuarrie the chance to find out exactly what happened.

HUMPHRYS: But you must have known what happened because a tweet was put out twenty four hours beforehand telling the world twelve hours beforehand, telling the world that something was going to happen on Newsnight that night that would reveal extraordinary things about child abuse and that would involve a senior Tory figure from the Thatcher years. You didn't see that tweet?

ENTWISTLE: I didn't see that tweet John. I now understand ..

HUMPHRYS: Why not?

ENTWISTLE: Well I check Twitter sometimes at the end of the day or I don't check it at all.

HUMPHRYS: You have a staff, you have an enormous staff of people who are reporting into you on all sorts of things. They didn't see this tweet that was going to set the world on fire?

ENTWISTLE: John this, this tweet I'm afraid was not, was not brought to my attention so I found out about this film after it had gone out. Now the ..

HUMPHRYS: Nobody, can I just be absolutely clear about this. Nobody said to you at any time or to anybody on your staff who would then report to you at any time "Look we've got this Newsnight film going out" – Newsnight should already light a few bulbs with you surely – but ".. we've got this film going out on Newsnight that is going to make massively serious allegations about a senior political, former senior political .." nobody even mentioned in the context that we now understand, nobody even mentioned it?

ENTWISTLE: No.

HUMPHRYS: Isn't that extraordinary?

ENTWISTLE: Well in the light of what's happened here I wish this had been referred to me but it wasn't and I have to, I run the BBC on the basis that the right people are put in the right positions to make the right decisions. Now in this case the film that was, the film was not signed off in Newsnight. Legal advice was involved. It was referred to the right places in news management and further referral upwards was, upwards was made. So in short a serious consideration was given to this. But that in my view makes it all the more important that Ken MacQuarrie gets to the bottom and finds out what happened here.

HUMPHRYS: So when did you find out? When did you find out?

ENTWISTLE: I found out about the film the following day.

HUMPHRYS: The following day. You didn't see it that night when it was broadcast?

ENTWISTLE: No I was out.

HUMPHRYS: So you heard about it the following day and then what

did you do?

ENTWISTLE: I, I, I, I made enquiries as to find out why what had happened on Twitter had happened because it seemed to me to be that the, the, the events on, of, surrounding the film in terms of what happened on Twitter were an important part in understanding how this thing had achieved a scale and created a noise around potential identification that was clearly surprising. I mean it's very, it's important to say I don't think, it's no kind of excuse or exoneration in this case but it is important to say that the film itself did not name, did not make a named allegation.

HUMPHRYS: No.

ENTWISTLE: But there is ..

HUMPHRYS: We know exactly what the background to that is now.

ENTWISTLE: Well, well what, what we ..

HUMPHRYS: But you – admittedly – but you have seen the film now I take it?

ENTWISTLE: Yes I have seen the film now.

HUMPHRYS: And your view of it was that it was an abomination journalistically?

ENTWISTLE: Well my view of it is that if Mr Messham has, Mr Messham rather has made a mistake in his identification then the film cannot stand.

HUMPHRYS: There's no question if – he says so.

ENTWISTLE: No, as he has there's no – if you, but if you had known that prior to transmission of the film the film could not stand.

HUMPHRYS: Does it not surprise you that nobody actually showed Mr Messham a picture of Lord McAlpine and said "Um, was this the man?"

ENTWISTLE: Well John I think there are a number of ..

HUMPHRYS: Well does that surprise you? Let's put aside all the other things.

ENTWISTLE: Well ..

HUMPHRYS: That is, is so fundamental that it's hard to exaggerate it.

ENTWISTLE: .. can I just cover a number of journalistic questions I have which I hope ..

HUMPHRYS: All right.

ENTWISTLE: .. Ken MacQuarrie will answer for me. Did the journalists carry out basic checks? Did they show Mr Messham the picture? Did they put allegations to the individual? Did they think of putting allegations to the individual? If they did not why not? And did they have any corroboration of any kind? These are the things we need to understand because this film as I say had the legal referral, was referred up through the chain yet it went ahead. There's some complexity here I absolutely need to get to the bottom of.

HUMPHRYS: Precisely when did you understand, learn that Mr Messham was in this case, in this specific case, an unreliable witness?

ENTWISTLE: Well I think that's a, I think that's a harsh thing to say about Mr Messham. I think Mr ..

HUMPHRYS: Well he's already told us he made a mistake.

ENTWISTLE: No but I think Mr Messham ..

HUMPHRYS: He's apologised profoundly.

ENTWISTLE: In the course of the film Mr Messham makes a, makes a, tells, tells a number of stories, gives a number of accounts ..

HUMPHRYS: I know.

ENTWISTLE: .. of abuse ..

HUMPHRYS: Well ..

ENTWISTLE: .. in the North, in the North West care home system in the nineties.

HUMPHRYS: .. rephrase it if you like.

ENTWISTLE: Well I ..

HUMPHRYS: In this particular case ..

ENTWISTLE: .. just think it's important ..

HUMPHRYS: .. an unreliable witness because he said he got it wrong.

ENTWISTLE: I, I, I ..

HUMPHRYS: When did you learn that?

ENTWISTLE: .. I became, I became aware that Mr Messham had got this wrong yesterday when, when he made his statement.

HUMPHRYS: When did you learn that there were doubts about the testimony, about his testimony?

ENTWISTLE: I only found out yesterday when I saw him make his apology to Lord McAlpine that there must be doubts about his testimony.

HUMPHRYS: And you didn't ask any questions during the course of the week because questions began to be raised very early on in the week as you know?

ENTWISTLE: No John, I didn't.

HUMPHRYS: Do you not think that you should have?

ENTWISTLE: I'm, there, the number of things that there are going on in the BBC means that when something is referred to me and brought to my attention I, I, I engage with it.

HUMPHRYS: So you've no natural curiosity ..

ENTWISTLE: This was ..

HUMPHRYS: .. you wait for somebody to come along to you and say "Excuse me Director General but this is happening and you may be interested"? You don't look for yourself? You don't do what

everybody else in the country does – read newspapers, listen to everything that's going on and say what's happening here?

ENTWISTLE: The, the, the second this was brought to my attention last night I immediately started ..

HUMPHRYS: Brought to your attention! Do you not read the papers? Do you not look? Do you not listen to the output?

ENTWISTLE: Well this, I saw this break on the web John, that's where I saw this.

HUMPHRYS: Well ...

ENTWISTLE: It's not a question of it being in the papers. But the second I saw it I started to make the enquiries about what had happened.

HUMPHRYS: Did you see the Guardian yesterday morning? Did you read the Guardian's front page yesterday morning?

ENTWISTLE: No John I was giving a speech yesterday morning early on. I didn't see the Guardian.

HUMPHRYS: Are some things rather more important than others? I mean do you not have to have a different set of priorities?

ENTWISTLE: You, but you have to prepare the speeches you have to make John.

HUMPHRYS: The Guardian yesterday carried a front page story which we now know was right, that cast doubt, serious doubt on the BBC's Newsnight programme, a flagship news programme for the BBC. You didn't know that that actually happened?

ENTWISTLE: No I'm afraid I didn't.

HUMPHRYS: When people ask questions about – this is perhaps where we should get to your own future. When people ask questions about the role of the BBC, of the Director General of the BBC, they point out as Mr Whittingdale just did, that he is the Editor in Chief. How do you define the responsibility of the Editor in Chief?

ENTWISTLE: The Editor in Chief has to take complete responsibility for the BBC's journalistic output but that does not mean that the Editor in Chief sits and signs off every single piece of it. The

organisation is too big. There is too much journalism going on. The way the system works is that things brought to the attention of the Editor in Chief are effectively handed over to him, responsibility is given to him at that moment. The system is, if the system is not referring things it should refer to the Editor in Chief then it's not working properly. This is one of the things I need to look at.

HUMPHRYS: We now know that it didn't work properly don't we? We now know that Newsnight has failed massively on one programme and it has failed massively on another programme and it's caused the BBC enormous damage. You, as you say, as Editor in Chief, are ultimately responsible. Therefore it leads to the obvious question, you should go shouldn't you?

ENTWISTLE: No John. I've been appointed the Director General. The Director General isn't appointed only if things are going to go well. The Director General is appointed to deal with things which go well and things which go badly. Now Newsnight has had two serious blows and I have reacted in both cases ..

HUMPHRYS: No the BBC has had two serious blows.

ENTWISTLE: No, I understand the BBC has but the two serious blows in this case refer to, refer to the programme of Newsnight. And in both cases I've taken the action, the right action to understand what happened and to start to be able to learn the lessons we need to learn.

HUMPHRYS: But you did it too late.

ENTWISTLE: It's very, it's very ..

HUMPHRYS: Massively too late.

ENTWISTLE: It's very important John to recognise that this is about, this is about Newsnight. Of course that has huge implications for BBC, for trust in the BBC. I absolutely accept that. But it would be absolutely wrong to, to slur by extension the rest of the amazing work that's going on across the rest of BBC News, the reporting from America, from China, the fine work this programme does. Ninety nine percent of what the BBC does is going out to the usual excellent standards and to the enormous satisfaction of its audience. I don't say any of that because I'm in any sense complacent but I've got to understand what has been, what seems to have been going wrong on Newsnight. In the latest case there's no question about it. That film shouldn't have gone out. It is absolutely unacceptable.

HUMPHRYS: Did you try to stop it? Did you want to stop that programme last night, the programme, the apology programme last

night?

ENTWISTLE: No I thought it was absolutely vital that ..

HUMPHRYS: Did you ever think about stopping Newsnight last night?

ENTWISTLE: I thought it was absolutely, I thought about a number of things John but I ..

HUMPHRYS: Including that?

ENTWISTLE: I'm, I'm, I'm, I've decided I'm going to see what Ken MacQuarrie reports before I made, make my mind up. The key thing for me last night was that Newsnight was given the chance to apologise. They made a mistake. It was really important that that apology was put out in their programme.

HUMPHRYS: You've already said that Newsnight will carry out no more investigations for the time being ...?

ENTWISTLE: No, no, what, what, yes, what I've, what I've said is that all investigative projects on Newsnight need to be halted ..

HUMPHRYS: Yes.

ENTWISTLE: .. while we check ..

HUMPHRYS: Exactly.

ENTWISTLE: .. the editorial rigour and supervision.

HUMPHRYS: Have you given any thought at all to shutting down Newsnight?

ENTWISTLE: No, I haven't John. Newsnight is a thirty two year old programme with a incredibly proud record of excellent, award winning journalism. Two, one mistake has been made for certain here. We need to allow the Pollard Review to determine what happened at this time last year. I think it would be absolutely disproportionate at this stage to talk about closing Newsnight down. This is a, this ..

HUMPHRYS: How can you have a news programme ..

ENTWISTLE: .. this is a programme ..

HUMPHRYS: .. that is not allowed to do investigative journalism, whatever investigative journalism is, however you define it?

ENTWISTLE: I'm taking the simple, prudent step there of ensuring that the quality of investigative journalism going on on Newsnight is up to scratch. That is not the same as saying it can't do it. I need to look, I need to check everything it's got underway and we need to make sure no more mistakes of the character of last Friday's are going to be made. That's vital. But I am not saying that Newsnight can't investigate in future. It's had a fantastic investigative record. I hope it will go on to do amazing investigations again.

HUMPHRYS: The BBC has – I hardly need to tell you this – a unique position in this country, it has unique privileges and it earns those on the basis of the trust that the people of this country have in the BBC. That trust has been severely damaged, possibly destroyed hasn't it?

ENTWISTLE: Well I don't believe it's been destroyed. The BBC has had crises of trust before. This is a bad crisis of trust I admit it but the, what you have to do is show your audiences that their trust in your is, is ready to restore. You h..., and the way you do that is you're open and clear about finding out what's gone wrong and we've done that, we're doing that through Savile. We have two reviews, independent reviews to find out what went wrong there in both cases and to be able to put those facts in front of the audience and show them the lessons we've learnt from it. I'm doing the same thing here. This is a more contained case. I'm acting, I'm acting decisively and quickly this weekend. I hope to have a report on my desk by Sunday by which point I will, I will I hope know exactly what happened and I'll know what further action to take including disciplinary action if that's appropriate.

HUMPHRYS: Disciplining other people but at no point will you say to yourself "I, George Entwistle should have been much more alert to the dangers in all this. I should have been watching it like a hawk right from the very beginning. Everything Newsnight did in this area I should have been on top of?" Not editing the programme, down there, on the stone as it were but "I, Director General, the Editor in Chief should have been on top of everything that programme did. I was remiss in that. It's no good me blaming other people because I am the boss". Do you not see that people will say he's talking about disciplining other people. He's not saying "I was remiss"?

ENTWISTLE: John you're effectively asking me to become the Editor of Newsnight. I was editor ..

HUMPHRYS: I'm not. I'm absolutely not doing that.

ENTWISTLE: Yes you are. I was ..

HUMPHRYS: It has an editor, he answers to you, you therefore should have said to him "What are you up to old boy" or old girl.

ENTWISTLE: I was Editor of Newsnight. I know what level of attention ..

HUMPHRYS: Indeed.

ENTWISTLE: .. to detail that takes. That is, that ..

HUMPHRYS: And you answered to your bosses.

ENTWISTLE: That is where, that is where that level of scrutiny should take place.

HUMPHRYS: Not with you at all?

ENTWISTLE: And I, and I ..

HUMPHRYS: You are entirely blameless in this?

ENTWISTLE: .. and I answer to my bosses. I answer to the Trust. I am, I am a Director General ..

HUMPHRYS: So ... the Trust says to you "Mr Entwistle we're worried about the way you've been running the BBC in this regard, this vitally important regard over the past few weeks" not unless they do that will you consider your own position, is that right?

ENTWISTLE: No John. I am a Director General who has encountered these problems and is doing everything, I am doing everything I can. I believe I'm doing the right things. I know that there are times when I was thought to be a bit slow over Savile. I could have been a bit quicker to move to announcing the independent enquiries by a, by a few days. I've admitted that. But the truth is I am doing the right things to try and put this stuff straight, that I am accountable to the Trust in that endeavour. If they do not feel I am doing the right things then obviously I will, I will be bound, bound by their judgment.

END OF TRANSCRIPT